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ABSTRACT

Conflict between school board members and superintndents that impacts the school district climate is discussed in this overview of related research. A review of recent studies points to a national trend in increased administrator turnover, strained administrator-school board relations, and a shrinking pool of job applicants. A conclusion is that although conflict is inherent in the educational system, educators and administrators must assign high priority to the retention of competent superintendents and recruitment of newcomers. Three tables summarize the data. (LMI)

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"Conflict between School Board Members and Superintendents of Schools"

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Conflict, the collision of interests and ideas, is a basic condition of existence. It is a dynamic which exists in all societies. Conflict is natural, functional and occurs in every social structure. Conflicts are experienced by all human beings. As human beings go about their daily concerns, they find conflict impinging on their lives.

Conflict occurs when individuals, groups, or organizations perceive their interests to be incompatible. This perceived incompatibility leads to a learned emotional response. These responses vary according to one's propensity for handling conflicts and frustration. The kinds of situations which produce conflict within and between humans and the ways in which humans attempt to resolve these conflicts are numerous and complex.

Conflict occurs in, affects, and in turn is affected by, a surrounding environment. To better understand conflict, then, it is necessary to look at the total social environment in which it occurs. This environment is constantly changing and so are the communities found within it. As these communities change, they sometimes come face to face with problems which must be solved but for which there is no precedent. These unique problems sometimes focus on values and attitudes which are deeply ingrained in the community's way of life. One such problem which has resulted in conflicts across the nation is that of school board members and superintendents of schools.

This conflict is often critical because the relationship between boards and their superintendents has a greater impact upon a school district's climate than most people realize. In fact, the impact of this relationship is usually far more significant than the actual decisions that are arrived at by its members. And more and more districts are facing conflict between the school board and superintendent, reducing the level of success of educational endeavors in their community.

In a 1988 NESDEC study of the shortage of school administrators in New England, 60 administrators were interviewed about the shortage to cite evidence for their beliefs, and to relate what they believed to be contributing factors. Ninety-two believe there is a shortage and 37% of the interviewees rated the problem as severe, generating a list of 22 possible reasons for the problem. Forty-eight percent cited difficulties with school boards, behind fiscal issues and role expectations as important reasons contributing to the shortage. Other significant difficulties are listed on the following table.

Insert Table 1 about here

Superintendents participating in the survey were vocal regarding the level of job-related aggravation they experience and rated this factor as very important to the current shortage. They portrayed the position as one which increasingly had conflicting burdens and demands, coupled with high expectations and lack of ultimate control in areas like curriculum and budget. Several respondents observed that often when the configuration of the school board changes, the superintendent is voted out simply because of style differences. Others said that the role of the school board member is no longer attractive to many citizens and often interests members who campaign on a particular agenda and may play out these agendas at the expense of the intra-board, board-superintendent, and board-community relations. Almost 45% of the Massachusetts superintendents in the survey said they expect to retire or leave their positions within the next 5 years.

Another study reported in the December, 1990 School Board Journal indicated that superintendents are leaving their jobs more rapidly than in the past. Data reported showed an increasing number of superintendents, over 53%, have 5 years or less in their current positions.

Years on Current Job

1 or less	10.7%
2-3 years	30.1%
4-5 years	12.2%
More than 5 years	46.9%

A third study by A.A.S.A. in 1989 solicited the opinions of members on a variety of subjects. On the questions of "how you would rate the current relationship between the superintendent and school board in your system" the results showed a significant increase in the number reporting "poor," "a lot of problems," "some serious," in contrast to a similar study in 1979-80.

A graph in the study shown below cites the major reasons for superintendents leaving their previous positions and shows that almost 10% leave because of poor relations with their boards of education.

Insert Table 2 about here

The report also points out that almost 20% of all superintendents in the study have from fair to poor to bad relations with their school boards. And only 61.3% want to remain in their current positions.

A Nebraska Study of 310 K-12 superintendents reported in the February 1991 issue of The School Administrator concludes that 58% said they had experienced "critical incidents" between school board members and themselves. Many of these incidents irreparably damaged professional relationships and lead to 29% being dismissed. These incidents were described by 80 superintendents who reported 151 critical incidents which the authors grouped into 12 categories, which are shown on the following chart:

12 Categories of Critical Incidents

(as reported by superintendents)

Frequency	Incident Surrounds Board Members':
24 percent	Family and friends
18 percent	Role interpretation
11 percent	Personal axes to grind
10 percent	Disagreement with Superintendents' decision
10 percent	Dysfunctioning as a group
7 percent	Disagreement with school athletic management
5 percent	Community involvement
4 percent	Personalities and/or personal problems
4 percent	Dealings with school employees
4 percent	Problems with superintendent's contract
2 percent	Problems with superintendent
1 percent	School finance decisions

These incidents ranged from problems with board members whose children, relatives and friends intimidated or had other board members vote to terminate coaches, to conflicts over hiring or terminating wives or relatives of board members.

A review of the incidents supports the oft held notion that confusion often exists about superintendent's and board roles resulting in problems in relationships between district leaders and their school boards or individual members.

A recent study of superintendent turnover in California reported a 16% annual change. Sixty-two percent of all superintendents are newcomers and 1 in 4 face renewal within 2 years, the study concluded. The statistics reflect all parts of the state,

large and small districts equally. Three of 4 superintendents leave because of acrimonious board-superintendent relations between a majority of board members and themselves. Seventy-five percent of superintendents vacated their California positions to escape an intolerable board-superintendent relationship which means non-renewal of contract, negotiated settlement on salary balance due under contract, dismissal for cause, acceptance of announcement of future retirement or reassignment to another position in the district.

In a 6 year period (1984-1989), 97% of all superintendents left and/or exchanged their positions at least once. And 25% of the California superintendents maintained their positions 2 years or less. The following pie chart illustrates the scope of turnover over the 6 year period.

Insert Table 3 about here

The California study is consistent with studies in North Carolina and Indiana where 20% and 17% of the superintendents vacated their seats last year.

The recent national publicity about superintendent vacancies in 18 of our largest cities has brought attention to the deflated tenure for urban superintendents which is now 2.5 years. It has also focused on the shrinking pool of urban applicants but has not brought much recognition to what appears to becoming a broader national crisis. The December, 1990 issue of the Executive Educator did report that over 53% of all superintendents have been in the current positions less than 5 years but the national media seems to be somewhat oblivious to this state of affairs.

It appears that superintendent turnover is acute and becoming worse at a time when there is the perception that the pool of well qualified candidates is evaporating. Many who once used to aspire to the superintendency are saying things like, "No thanks. The compensation and other rewards are not good enough. The hours are too long and frustrating. The perils are too great. I prefer the security of a teaching or other mid-level administrative position."

Several recent reports predict that 75% of all U.S. superintendents will be eligible for retirement in 3 years.

What can be done to retain competent superintendents and to attract promising newcomers to the profession in light of such issues as conflicts with boards, financial woes, union problems, drugs and crime in and around schools, teacher and parent desire for more involvement in school decision making, student discipline, district reorganizations, state mandates, political power struggles affecting the schools, inadequate training for boards and superintendents, individual agendas, constant turnover in board members, integration problems, internal board conflict, demands by business leaders for higher school standards, the push to reduce dropouts, accountability, enrollment declines and increases, school closings and construction, reduction in force, civil rights of students and employees, the war in the Persian Gulf, parent choice, a lack of parent interest and support, the increase in single parent homes, the lack of public interest in our schools, prayer in the schools, AIDS education, equity issues, censorship problems, and the accessibility of school information to citizens, among many others, that complicate and at times, makes the role of superintendent impossible or at best extremely difficult?

Although many of the pressures and changes that cause conflict for superintendents is part of a natural process, inherent in the nature of all important relationships and amenable to constructive regulation through communication, short term superintendents hurt a district's chances of achieving its educational goals,

gaining community support, energizing its faculty and administrators, and, when appropriate, attracting bright, capable leadership to our schools. But one of the significant ones that can and must be addressed is disharmony that often exists between boards of education and superintendents. It must be a high priority if our students are to be adequately prepared to live and compete successfully in the next century.

TABLE 1

	% Who Cited the Factor	% Who Ranked the Factor 1-10	% Who Ranked Factor 1-2-3 1=most important
FISCAL ISSUES			
Salary	83%	79%	54%
Poor performance incentives	61%	56%	20%
High housing costs	52%	47%	13%
Low district budgets	38%	32%	10%
ROLE EXPECTATIONS ISSUES			
High level of aggravation	74%	69%	32%
Lack of job satisfaction	55%	50%	25%
SCHOOL BOARD ISSUES			
Large number of school boards	67%	62%	22%
Difficulties with school boards	48%	43%	11%
SUPPLY ISSUES			
Administrator retirement coupled with lower teacher interest	51%	45%	12%
Lack of geographic mobility	47%	44%	17%
Lack of women applicants	33%	28%	5%
Early retirement	24%	19%	5%
Lack of internal promotion mechanisms	23%	20%	4%
Poor applicant job-seeking skills	6%	6%	2%
SUPPORT ISSUES			
Lack of community support	47%	44%	7%
Inadequate professional support system	44%	41%	10%
Inadequate central office staff	44%	38%	8%
TRAINING ISSUES			
Poor management skills	27%	26%	6%
Ineffective pre-service preparation	19%	18%	8%
REGIONAL/NATIONAL COOPERATION ISSUES			
Non-transferrable retirement system	30%	26%	2%
Problems with certification	25%	21%	1%
PUBLIC RELATIONS ISSUES			
Ineffective district advertising	4%	2%	0%

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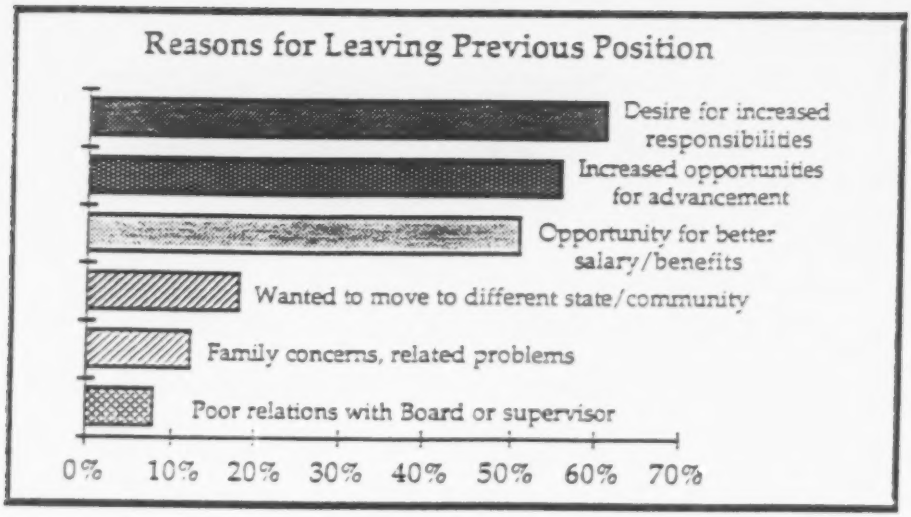
TABLE 2



■ RELATIONS WITH PREVIOUS SUPERVISOR: *Which of the following best describes your relations with your supervisor (school board if you were a superintendent) at the time you left your previous position?*

	1981-82		1988-89		1989-90	
Relations	All	Supts.	All	Supts.	All	Supts.
Good, definitely could have stayed	77.1%	81.6%	76.3%	75.9%	81.4%	80.7%
Fair, probably could have stayed	7.1	8.4	10.4	11.1	8.7	10.3
Poor, probably could not have stayed	3.3	3.0	5.3	6.2	4.1	4.3
Bad, definitely could not have stayed	2.3	3.5	3.1	2.4	1.0	0.8
No response	10.2	3.5	4.8	4.2	4.9	3.9

■ SATISFACTION WITH CURRENT POSITION: *How satisfied are you with your current position?*

	1981-82		1988-89		1989-90	
Relations	All	Supts.	All	Supts.	All	Supts.
Very satisfied	53.4%	60.3%	60.6%	64.1%	58.5%	60.5%
Moderately satisfied	30.5	30.8	29.9	27.6	31.3	29.4
Moderately dissatisfied	5.5	4.9	5.0	4.2	5.3	5.8
Very dissatisfied	1.2	0.5	1.4	1.6	1.8	1.2
No response	9.4	3.5	3.1	2.4	3.1	3.1

■ CAREER GOALS: *How would you characterize your career goals?*

	1988-89		1989-90	
	All	Supts.	All	Supts.
Intend to stay in this position	54.4%	60.4%	54.9%	61.3%
Want another position with same or similar title	21.7	28.7	21.8	28.2
Would like to move to another position with a different title	19.2	6.9	19.0	5.8
No response	4.8	4.0	4.3	4.7

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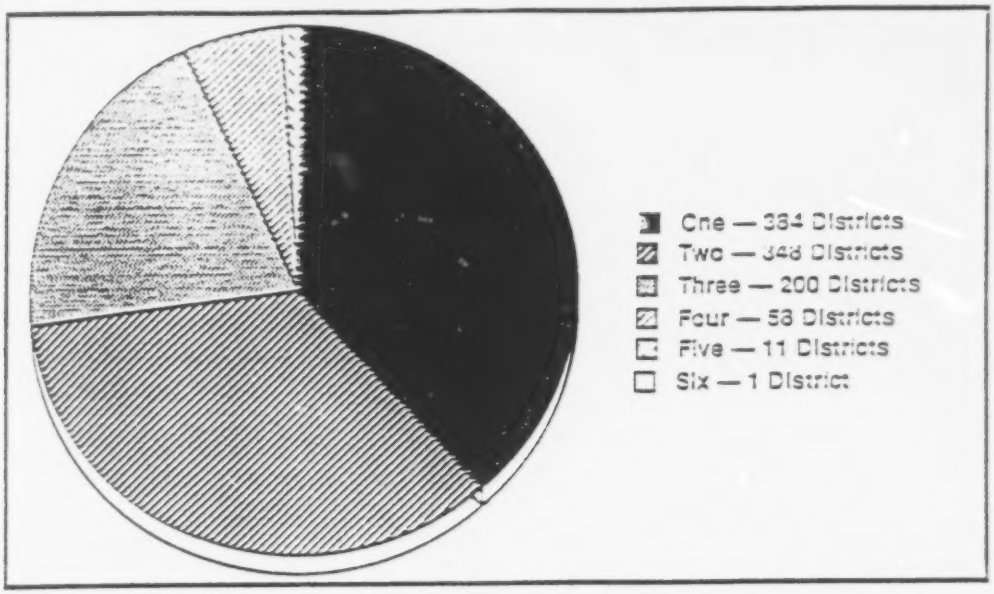
TABLE 3

Number of Superintendents Serving Districts Over Six-Year Period



Source — California Public School Directory, 1984 - 89.

384 districts had only one person serve as superintendent over the last six years; 348 had two; 200 had three; 58 had four; 11 had five; 1 had six.

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